



Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy  
Remarks as Prepared for Delivery  
Panel Discussion on Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican Community in Central Florida  
Acacia Banquet Hall  
Orlando, Florida  
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Good morning. My name is Stephanie Murphy and I represent Florida's seventh congressional district in Congress. I am so pleased to be here.

Thank you for the opportunity to make some brief opening remarks about Puerto Rico and about the Puerto Rican community in central Florida. I want to thank Tony Suarez for moderating our panel discussion. I also want to thank my fellow panelists, State Senator Victor Torres and Orange County School Board Member Joie Cadle. Finally, I want to thank all of you for taking the time to be here this morning.

I have been a Member of Congress for about six months. It is an interesting time to be in Washington, DC, to say the least. Every day, I have the opportunity to work on a range of domestic policy and foreign policy issues. I serve on the House Armed Services Committee and the House Small Business Committee. I am determined to enhance our nation's security and to empower hard-working entrepreneurs in central Florida who want to begin or expand a business.

Even though there is a lot going on in our nation's capital, you can rest assured that I am already making, and will continue to make, issues that impact the Puerto Rican community one of my top priorities.

As you know, there are 3.4 million American citizens living in Puerto Rico. Because of the migration of Puerto Ricans from the island to the mainland, especially in recent years, there are now 5.4 million individuals of Puerto Rican heritage living in the states. Remarkably, the Puerto Rican population in Florida has increased by 123 percent since the year 2000, and now stands at 1.1 million.

Simply put: you are a vibrant and powerful community. You deserve recognition and respect. You also deserve to have the issues you care about taken seriously by your elected leaders, and I intend to do precisely that. Please hold me to that promise.

Before I outline three areas of particular focus, let me make an honest admission. It is said that one sign of wisdom is knowing what you do *not* know. Well, I am wise enough to know that I am

new to this job, that Puerto Rico issues can be complex, and that I don't have all the answers. A primary purpose of today's event is to enable me to hear directly from you about your specific challenges and concerns, and to learn from you. So I plan to listen as much as I talk.

The first issue I am focused on is Puerto Rico's political status. I know this is a subject that arouses great passion among Puerto Ricans, whether they live on the island or here in the states. For me, at its core, this is a civil rights issue.

My personal history informs my perspective. My parents, my brother and I came to America as refugees from Vietnam when I was a child. Our family fled a country where human rights and human dignity were not respected and we were given sanctuary by a country that, while not perfect, is devoted to the principles of democracy and justice.

I know that many of you have family and friends still living in Puerto Rico, and that you will always have the island in your heart. I just think it is morally wrong that the U.S. citizens living in Puerto Rico can fight and die for our country in the armed forces, but cannot vote for their president and commander-in-chief. That is not the America I know and love.

I also think it is unjust that the people of Puerto Rico do not have two U.S. senators and five voting members of the U.S. House of Representatives who have the power to protect and promote the island's interests.

And I think it is wrong that, simply because Puerto Rico is a territory, the federal government can—and too often does—treat Puerto Rico worse than the states under key economic and health programs. This unequal treatment harms quality of life on the island and drives migration to the mainland.

Floridians will always welcome Puerto Ricans to the Sunshine State because you contribute so much to our communities, our culture, and our economy. You make Florida a better and stronger place. At the same time, I do not believe that Puerto Ricans should have to move to Florida or another state in order to be treated equally. I think Puerto Ricans should be treated equally *in Puerto Rico*. And I think making Puerto Rico a state is the natural way for its people to achieve genuine equality. After 119 years under the American flag, there is no doubt you have *earned* it.

I recognize that some people in your community feel differently. Like any large and energetic community, your views are diverse, not monolithic. I know some of you may support independence for Puerto Rico, which is also a democratic and dignified status. You will never hear me criticize those who support independence. I just think equality through statehood is the logical next step for Puerto Rico. But I respect those who disagree with me.

That brings me to my *second* point. As long as Puerto Rico remains a territory and therefore capable of being treated unfairly by Congress, I will fight alongside like-minded Democrats and Republicans to pass laws that improve Puerto Rico's treatment under critical federal programs, whether it is health programs like Medicaid and Medicare, or economic support programs like the earned income tax credit and the child tax credit. There is no reason why a family in Orocovis should be treated differently than a family in Orlando, or why a senior citizen in San Juan should

be treated differently than a senior citizen in Sanford. When it comes to Puerto Rico, equality will always be my north star.

My *third* and final point pertains to the Puerto Rican community right here in central Florida. For those of you have recently moved from Puerto Rico to the Orlando area, I know there are workshops available to help make the transition as smooth and painless as possible. Whether you are new to the area or have lived here your entire life, my office is always available to help you obtain access to information about housing, health care, education, employment opportunities, and especially about federal and state government programs that you may be eligible for. Please use us as a resource; our door is always open.

I want to close by talking about language—and about a bill I will soon introduce in Congress. Like it is for some of you, English is my second language. I grew up in a home where my parents spoke Vietnamese, so I had to learn English in school and from my friends. Trust me: I know firsthand that it can be a challenge, that it can cause feelings of insecurity, and that people can sometimes be cruel when they hear you speak with an accent or mispronounce a word.

In March, the *Orlando Sentinel* ran an article about how the Orange County school system is struggling to provide an adequate education to students who are English language learners. In part because so many families have moved from Puerto Rico to central Florida in recent years, there just aren't enough resources to hire bilingual teachers and to provide these students with the assistance they need. This is a real problem.

I am determined to help—because children who speak both English *and* Spanish will be in a better position to perform well in school, to obtain some form of higher education, and eventually to get a well-paying and fulfilling job in the private or public sector. That is what every parent wants for their child.

There is a federal government program in which the U.S. Department of Education provides annual grants to each state so the state can help students with limited proficiency in English learn the language and master challenging academic material. The problem is that the formula is based in part on the number of students in each state who are *immigrants*—that is, who come to the United States from other countries. But Puerto Rico, of course, is not a foreign country—and so students who move from the island to Florida are not sufficiently counted in the formula. Therefore, Florida, and central Florida in particular, does not receive the funding it should. In the coming days, I will file a bill in Congress to fix this formula. Our children deserve a first-class education and I hope this bill—if enacted into law—will help.

Again, thank you very much for coming today and allowing me to learn from you. I look forward to the panel discussion and the question-and-answer session.